

# Preface

by Liana Di Girolami Cheney

In celebration of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, it is appropriate to honor modern scholars, in particular, Einar Rud (1892-c.1980), who was the first to view Vasari as an art historian and writer. Rud's *Giorgio Vasari, Renaissances Kunsthistoriker*, was first published in Danish in 1961 by Gyldendal in Copenhagen. In 1963, the book was translated into English by Reinald Spink as *Giorgio Vasari's Life and Lives: The First Art Historian*, published by Thames and Hudson of London. Rud continued to write about the significant impact of Vasari's writings and paintings on the history of Italian Renaissance in his book, *Italienske kunstnerportraetter fra Gotik og Renaissance (Med traesnit af Giorgio Vasari)*, published only in Danish in 1967 by Carit Andersen of Copenhagen.

Praising Vasari's accomplishments and Rud's recognition of Vasari's contributions to art history, the New Academia Publishing of Washington, DC, reprinted Rud's *Giorgio Vasari's Life and Lives: The First Art Historian*.

In the first part of the book, Rud elaborates on Vasari's biography:

Vasari had an extremely active career, but much of his time was spent as an impresario devising decorations for courtly festivals and similar ephemera. He praised the Medici family for forwarding his career from childhood, and much of his work was done for Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Vasari was a prolific painter in the mannerist style and was also active as an architect. He supervised the building of Pope Julius III's Villa Giulia in Rome, but his architectural masterpiece is the reconstruction of the Uffizi picture gallery in Florence (from 1560), originally the offices of the Medici administration. In addition, he established first Florentine Academy of Design (1563). He died in 1574. Originally, his tomb was in Santa Maria della Pieve in Arezzo.

In the second part of his book, Rud emphasizes the importance of the *Vite (Le vite de' piú eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, et Architettori)* or the *Lives (The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects)* in the history of biographies.

Vasari's *Lives* was published in Florence in 1550; it was revised and enlarged in 1568. The tradition of such biographies goes back to antiquity; technical treatises on the arts were also written in classical times, Pliny the Elder and Vitruvius having produced two celebrated examples. As early as the time of Lorenzo Ghiberti there had been an attempt to imitate classical prototypes by writing on earlier and contemporary artists, and Ghiberti, in his *Commentaries* (ca. 1447-1455), also wrote the earliest autobiography by a modern artist.

During the late 15th and early 16th centuries similar treatises were projected and written, and Vasari knew and used some of these earlier works. What distinguishes the first edition of his *Lives* is the fact that it is an extensive account of the artists' biographies and anecdotes of Florentine culture compared to its predecessors or potential rivals. As Vasari says himself, he wrote as an artist for other artists, with knowledge of technical matters.

Briefly, the plan of the book was to show how Italian—and specifically Tuscan—artists had revived the glories of classical art late in the 13th century, reaching a crescendo in Michelangelo.

Vasari took great care to gather material on his numerous journeys, and, more than any of his predecessors, he looked at works of art. On the other hand, his reverence for factual truth was less than would be required of a modern historian, and he was unable to resist an amusing anecdote. This gives his book a liveliness and directness, which has ensured its continued popularity independent of its historical importance.

In 1568, Vasari produced a second edition, much larger than the original and containing a great many alterations, particularly in the earlier lives. It also has many new biographies of living (or recently dead) artists, so it is an essential source for Vasari's contemporaries. He gives more space to non-Florentine artists and even mentions one or two non-Italians.

It is almost impossible to imagine the history of Italian art without Vasari, so fundamental is his *Lives*. It is the first real and autonomous history of art both because of its monumental scope and because of the integration of the individual biographies into a whole.

Following Julius Schlosser Magnino's ambition of composing an historiography and lexicon on Vasari's cultural milieu and accomplishments, Rud recognizes Vasari as the first art historian since the classical time of Pliny the Elder.<sup>1</sup> Successive studies by Paola Barrochi, Wolfram Prinz, T. S. R. Boase and recently Patricia Rubin, extended the pioneer contribution of Rud's writings on Vasari as the "first art historian."<sup>2</sup>

Vasari, as an artist of the Cinquecento, views himself as *huomo buono et docto in buon lettere*.<sup>3</sup> His calling as an artist is respected by his society and is considered a profession rather than a trade. Artists of the Cinquecento achieve this new social status by freeing themselves from the guilds, which, though they guaranteed a market, infringed on their artistic freedom. Also, by choosing to practice various arts such as writing poetry or treatises, as well as painting and sculpting, Cinquecento artists are viewed by the humanists as *virtuosi*. By traveling and becoming acquainted with the various arts in other centers, artists could improve on, alter, or assimilate different styles. And most of all, they could instruct their patrons about art. Moreover, their friendship and personal contact with patrons makes artists known, which served to advance the recognition of their merit. The new artistic freedom and the spirit of competition begin to challenge the validity and meaning of the arts. Artists begin to write treatises explaining and defining a variety of concepts such as imitation, invention, *concetto* and *disegno*.<sup>4</sup>

Along with this questioning, artists began to assess their position vis-à-vis artists who were their fellow artists, their teachers, and their sources of inspiration past and present. The new social status of artists creates both a new purpose for art and a new type of art: Mannerism or the Maniera style. For Cinquecento artists, this is the beginning of a new role in their society. Now artists are powerful, rich and famous, because with their art, they are giving honor and pleasure to their patrons. The artist becomes a courtier-artist.<sup>5</sup> Thus, art does not solely exist as a religious, political and didactic tool, but also as a social endeavor or cultural necessity. New standards are created according to this new image of art and decorum becomes a *sine qua non* for all art of the Cinquecento. These achievements place artists in a privileged position in the courts and in the circle of educated people, as well as in the ecclesiastical realm. But these realms also create a precarious situation for artists, since their new social status leaves them unconnected to any social or religious institution that traditionally guaranteed commissions.

Towards the end of the Cinquecento, Maniera artists begin to realize that in order to maintain their professional status, schools and academies needed to be established to educate new artists and to protect their professional interests.<sup>6</sup> One aspect of this artistic freedom and professional status is the artists' new interest in purchasing, designing and decorating their houses. Vasari is a prime example of this emergent breed of artist, and the paintings of the Casa Vasari abundantly demonstrate this new phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

Vasari's intellectual curiosity, enthusiasm and artistic ability made it possible for him to put forth a new perspective on art. This art expresses a concern for success, a fascination for the antique, and a delight for virtuosity depicted in his religious and secular paintings, and is also revealed in his writings—the *Vite*, letters, *ricordi*, and *I Ragionamenti*.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Vasari understands the new artistic role of the artist, thus formulating in his writings and persona a new level of aspiration: a "literato" or "umanista" ("humanist").<sup>9</sup> Vasari's humanistic role combines the examination of artistic pursuit and

practical undertakings with intellectual and cultural endeavors, thus establishing the path of the art historian.

Kudos to Einar Rud, who earlier on addressed and praised the contribution to art history of Giorgio Vasari.

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## Notes

- 1 Julius Schlosser Magnimo, *La letteratura artistica* (Florence: La Nuova Italia editrice, 1979, Italian translation by Filippo Rossi from the original German, *Die Kunsthistorische Literatur* of 1924, published by Anton Schroll & Company in Vienna).
- 2 Paola Barocchi, *Il Vasari Pittore* (Milan: Club del Libro, 1964); Wolfram Prinz, "Vasari's Sammlung von Künstlerbildnissen," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* (1966), pp. 8–40; and Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (London: Yale University Press, 1995). See also, Z. Wazbinski, "Le idée de l'histoire dans la première et la seconde édition des vies de Vasari," in *Il Vasari: Storiografo e Artista* (Florence: Istituto di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1976), pp. 1–27; Paul Barolsky, "Vasari and Historical Imagination," *Word and Image*, 15 (1999), pp. 286–91; Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Teachers: Sacred and Profane Art* (New York/London: Peter Lang, 2007); and Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Prefaces: Art and Theory* (New York/London: Peter Lang, 2011).
- 3 Rudolph Wittkower and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 16.
- 4 Eugenio Battisti, "Il concetto d'imitazione nel cinquecento italiano," in *Rinascimento e Barocco* (Turin: Edam, 1960), pp. 175–215.
- 5 Michael Levey, *Painting at Court* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), pp. 117–20.
- 6 Carl Goldstein, "Vasari and the Florentine Accademia del Disegno," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (1975), pp. 145–52, and Z. Wazbinski, *L'Accademia Medicea del Disegno a Firenze Nel Cinquecento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1987), 2 vols.
- 7 Liana De Girolami Cheney, *The Homes of Giorgio Vasari*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), translated in Italian as *Le Dimore di Giorgio Vasari* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).
- 8 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, et Architettori* (Florence: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550); Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, et Architettori* (Florence: F. Giunti, 1568); and Giorgio Vasari, *I Ragionamenti* (Florence: F. Giunti, 1588). See also, Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, et Architettori* ed., Rossana Bettarini and Paola Barocchi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1966–2002); Karl Frey, ed., *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris I and II* (Munich: George Müller, 1923 and 1930); H.M. Frey, ed., *Neue Briefe von Giorgio Vasari III* (Munich: August Hopfer, 1940); Alessandro del Vita, *Il Carteggio di Giorgio Vasari*, Arezzo: Tipografia Zelli, 1923); Alessandro del Vita, *Inventario e Regesto dell'Archivio Vasariano* (Arezzo: Tipografia Zelli, 1938); Alessandro del Vita, *Lo Zibaldone di Giorgio Vasari* (Rome: R. Istituto Archeologico e Storia dell'Arte, 1938); Alessandro del Vita, *Il Carteggio di Giorgio Vasari* (Arezzo: Tipografia Zelli, 1941); J. L. Draper, "Vasari's Decoration in the Palazzo Vecchio. The Ragionamenti: Translated with an Introduction and Notes" (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1973); and Paola Tinagli Baxter, "Giorgio Vasari's Ragionamenti" (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1988).
- 9 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 178.